

Issue IV, Fall 2015**The Orphan**
(A Story by Therron Ducharme)

As Matt and I made our way down the old logging road, the dehydrated remains of once vibrant foliage made a crunching sound underneath the soles of our moving boots. It was a chilly Saturday morning in December. After a work week of trouble and stress, this quiet and peaceful outing was a needed change. I was cautiously hopeful and excited about our father/son hunt.

We hadn't spoken a word since entering the woods. As we were quietly approaching the stands, Matt startled me when he asked, "Dad, you're taking the tree stand on the loblolly and I'm taking the one on the white oak, right?"

"Yes." I whispered, directly. I had built the stand on the loblolly pine higher, to avoid an unsafe line of fire.

We approached the white oak stand first. The rope dangled beside the wooden ladder. As I watched Matt tie off his rifle, I leaned down and whispered, "Now, remember, if you see one, make sure you have a clean shot. If you shoot one, stay put."

His brown eyes made contact with mine, as he replied, "Okay. Love you, Dad."

Michelle and I had adopted Matt when he was four. He was one of us, now—a Thompson. He was twelve and on the verge of becoming a "Thompson man." Next year, he would be hunting on a stand by himself. This hunt was another opportunity to prepare him. This week of doe season broadened his opportunity, even more.

"Love you, too, Son." I said.

After watching Matt hoist up his rifle, load it, and settle, I made my way to the other stand. It was located about

seventy yards to the left of his. Upon reaching the top of the stand, I carefully pulled up my rifle and loaded it. I scanned the woods for movement. With a deep breath, I began to absorb the essence of this elemental experience. The sun was still low on the horizon. Shadows slowly shifted through the tree line, adding to the camouflage of the brush. The silence was enabling me to calibrate my hearing to the sounds of the natural surroundings.

About an hour and fifteen minutes later, the silence broke to a loud death. The report of Matt's rifle rang my ears, and I was suddenly seized by excitement. About ten seconds had passed before Matt called out.

"I got 'em!" Matt yelled in an elated tone.

"Stay put! Be quiet!" I sternly commanded. If the deer was only injured, I didn't want it to run. Instantly, I started assessing what had just happened. Questions rapidly formed and raced in my mind. Did he say I got him? Is it a spike or a big buck? Is it a trophy buck? I was stricken with pride! He did it! I started imagining the rest of the day—the celebration, the father/son ritual of cleaning the first deer together, and the smearing of the blood on his cheeks to glorify his successful arrival through a rite of passage.

Anxiously, I looked down at my watch. Five minutes had finally clicked off. I made my way down the stand's ladder and headed toward Matt.

I called out, "Is the deer still there?"

"Yes!" Matt yelled back. I sped up my pace. I could hardly wait to see for myself.

While trying to control my erupting nerves, I yelled, “Go ahead, and lower your rifle! Make sure it’s unloaded and tied off! I’m heading your way!”

We met at the base of his stand. Immediately, we started cutting a direct path toward the fallen deer. When we arrived, I saw it was a doe. Matt had shot her in the head. The bullet’s explosive impact had removed most of the left side of her head. Oozing brain matter, her shattered skull lay on a pillow of bloody leaves and sticks. Her lifeless brown eye gazed upwards.

Before either one of us could say a word, I heard a sound that hit me with the same ferocity as Matt’s rifle report earlier. It was a high-pitched cry coming from a briar thicket about fifteen yards away. Both of us spotted it at the same time. Trembling and pacing, it accusingly stared at both of us as it cried out. It was challenging its fear of us while disregarding its inborn instinct to run away. Repeatedly, it came toward us yet kept its distance, stomping the ground with its tiny front hooves. Then, it would back off, crying the whole time. It wanted its mother. It wanted us to run away.

Matt’s brown eyes met with mine. The turn of events had arrived as fast and violent as the bullet. Matt’s pleas were revealed through his demeanor and tone. He wiped his eyes as he asked, “What are we going to do, Dad?”

The fawn’s ardent cries grew louder. Everything was growing louder—the stares, the cries, the questions. Spontaneously, I shouldered my rifle and sighted the fawn’s head. The sound of judgment was rendered from the barrel, and dead silence was delivered with the thunder. Its blood spilled. Matt’s question was answered. I killed the orphan. As I turned, I saw that Matthew’s countenance had fallen like the dead mother and her fawn.